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Express-News: Metro and State

At Lackland AFB, every religious belief is honored and addressed

By John Gutierrez-Mier
San Antonio Express-News

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Every weekend, thousands of camouflage-clad young people march to a cluster of buildings at Lackland AFB to get a spiritual lift — or at least a respite from instructors barking in their faces.

For recruits at one of the largest basic training facilities in the U.S. military, there is no such thing as personal space.

Starting Friday evenings, though, they can find a small piece of a life they left behind by practicing their faith. They can also seek out other faiths or explore the idea of faith itself from a smorgasbord of religious offerings.

Thousands take advantage of it. Sometimes, homesick and stressed-out trainees break down and cry. At Catholic Masses, tissues are handed out along with the Eucharist.

Air Force policy allows all personnel their constitutional free exercise of religious beliefs, said Col. Mike Huhn, basic military training commander at the base.

For basic trainees, that translates into one hour for religious instruction and one hour for worship each week, plus extra time for worship on religious holy days. They aren't required to attend any of it and can use their two hours for personal time — but nine out of 10 head for the chapel facilities, Huhn said.



Greg Holwitt of San Antonio attends a Jewish Shabbat service. Although not a trainee, his father is an Air Force retiree.
Photo by Karen L. Shaw

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And that requires the largest chaplaincy program in the Air Force, offering 28 worship services to about 7,000 recruits every weekend during summer, the busiest training season.

Friday evening Jewish Shabbat services, conducted in English and Hebrew at a pyramid-shaped chapel, draw as many as 17 trainees or as few as five, said Rabbi Ira Flax, one of only six active-duty rabbis in the Air Force.

The altar holds a Torah scroll containing Jewish religious Scripture, but it's also used by Christians later in the weekend, and the chapel has an interchangeable cross and crucifix, concealed by a curtain during Jewish services.

"After basic training you'll all wind up in far-flung places," Flax told several trainees. "When you get there, contact a chaplain or a lay religious leader. You won't be the first member of the Jewish faith they meet."

Alexander Levy, 17, of San Francisco said he attended synagogue only occasionally when he lived at home, but now he's a regular.

"It really fills a void in my spirit," Levy said after the 50-minute service. "I joined the Air Force mainly because of the job training it would give me. (Shabbat) is something I look forward to."

Timothy Louis, 20, of Troy, Ohio, had other reasons for attending.

"I've never been to a church or a religious service," said Louis, who wore the Jewish yarmulke, or skullcap. "I'm here to observe what the Jewish faith is all about. Converting to Judaism is something I might possibly consider."

The Seventh-day Adventist service takes place on Saturdays. So does the weekly information session on Wicca, taught in a classroom building by Staff Sgt. Luke Dahn, an oral surgery technician at Wilford Hall Medical Center.

"This is an earth-based, self-paced religion similar to Native American shamanism," Dahn said after an hourlong meeting that drew about 40 trainees, ranging from the serious to the merely curious.

One of them, James Browning, 19, of Jackson, Mich., said he's been a practicing Wiccan for several years. He said most of his fellow trainees are inquisitive about it.

"You're stuck in one huge space, and it's only natural that a lot of people ask me about my religion," Browning said. "They ask if we're Satanists. I explain that we aren't and tell them it's a nature-based religion."

Sunday is the busiest day for the chaplains. Crucifixes, crosses and

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Eastern Orthodox icons are set up and taken down, sometimes at a frenzied pace between closely scheduled worship services.

During much of the morning, combined Protestant services are conducted at one end of the Basic Military Training Chapel, the heart of Lackland's complex of chaplain facilities, while Catholic Masses are celebrated at the other.

Attending Mass had been a familiar experience for Daniel Machado, an 18-year-old trainee from Pinon Hills, Calif. Now it's an emotional one. He graduated from high school in May and had never been away from family and friends until a few weeks ago.

"I broke down and cried the first time I came to Mass," he said on a recent Sunday. "Mass is motivating and gets your mind off the training."

Hymns were part of the service, including a few in Spanish. As the trainees made their way to communion, the sniffing began, then the tears.

About an hour later in a much smaller room only a few feet from the Catholic chapel, a pile of shoes were lying near the door. Prayer rugs were spread out and blessings were written in Arabic on a bulletin board.

A local Muslim lay leader, Refad Habeeb, met with 10 Muslim trainees and discussed several tenets of Islam.

Many of the recruits asked about prayer. Muslims are required to pray five times a day.

"When circumstances do not permit you to pray publicly, you can pray in your heart," Habeeb advised the group.

Maryam Fatima, 20, of North Potomac, Md., said it was a comfort to find other Muslims on base, especially since she was the only Muslim in her barracks, which houses about 60 female trainees.

"My faith is above all the most important thing in my life," she said. "This time helps me get through the training."

Most of the Sunday services were serene, although the combined Protestant service at 11 a.m. had the trappings of a rock concert.

A choir made up of young recruits from all of the training squadrons clapped and raised their hands while video clips of trainees marching and doing push-ups were flashed on two screens, sparking a roar from the recruits. Four services draw about 4,000 each Sunday.

Some joined arms and swayed as the music slowed. And like their counterparts at the Catholic Mass, a few began to cry, some openly sobbing.

Choir member Herman Mackey, an 18-year-old trainee from Bakersfield, Calif., said his Baptist faith has been an anchor for him.

"I love to sing and the service motivates me to keep going, especially during the week," Mackey said.

The intensity of their six-week training period might be what drives trainees back to their spiritual roots or makes them think about setting down new ones, said Huhn, the training commander.

"I don't know why everyone gets religion during basic training," he said. "But there's an old saying that there are no atheists in a foxhole."

This tendency to seek spiritual guidance isn't unique to combat situations, although finding God in times of danger and heightened stress is well documented throughout history. But Capt. William "Trip" Ziegler, who has ministered to young airmen and soldiers in peacetime and at war, said today's trainees are especially receptive to religion.

"This generation of young people seems to have a registered interest in spirituality," said Ziegler, a United Methodist minister who is a cadet chaplain at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo. "We're physical and emotional beings. Training is designed to break them down, then bring them up. The nature of the training challenges them to seek inner strength."

Ziegler served half a year in war-torn Bosnia in 1997 and 1998 ministering to U.S. troops that were part of the U.N. peace mission. Besides providing spiritual guidance, the chapel played a role in helping build a sense of community among U.S. troops, he said.

"We were there to offer our troops something they were familiar with, and combat seems to be the ultimate stresser," Ziegler said. "For one thing, combat reminds people how fragile life is. It tends to put people in touch with their mortality. I would tend to believe that spiritual strength helps soldiers and airmen do the things they must do in order to survive and fulfill their mission."

Takeshi Takamine, a local Buddhist who is part of Soka Gakkai International, an American Buddhist movement, said trainees join him every Sunday afternoon to contemplate, and he's not surprised that the majority are not practicing Buddhists.

For Ukrainian-born Gene Pecar, 18, simply being able to attend Takamine's hourlong information session — and a Baha'i service earlier in the day — was especially moving. He's Jewish, and his family fled what was then the Soviet Union in 1989 because of anti-Semitism.

They spent about a year in refugee camps in Austria and Italy before settling in Carmel, Ind. Pecar joined the Indiana Air National Guard right after high school, hoping to become a fighter pilot. But even potential officers have to go through basic training.

Pecar called the variety of religious opportunities at Lackland "unbelievable."

"I'm amazed at how many people here take this for granted," he said. "All of this is happening on a military base. This is a great country."

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By Dagny Taggart

August 31, 2001

Thursday, Laughlin AFB's 47th Flying Training Wing got a new commander. Relieving Colonel Jack Egginton is Colonel Eric Rosborg. Egginton served as Laughlin's wing commander for a short nine months. He didn't exactly get fired, however. Egginton is moving up to become the Chief of Staff of the Air Force's Executive Officer--a position that almost certainly will land him the rank of general.



Colonel Jack Egginton delivers an emotional speech as incoming wing commander, Colonel Eric Rosborg looks on.

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